

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY
"ISIDOR TODORAN" DOCTORAL SCHOOL

**THE CULTURAL ROLE OF WOMEN DURING THE
PALAIOLOGOS DYNASTY**

- SUMMARY -

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SUMMARY

Keywords: Palaiologos, culture, women, literary circle, patronage, art, role, education.

The research topic, "The cultural role of women during the Palaeolo dynasty" was chosen for two main reasons. The first is related to the fact that the subject has not been treated in the historical literature. Although Byzantine women have been written about, these works have either been general (with short sections devoted to the Palaiologos period) or have dealt with other phases of Byzantine history. A similar situation exists internationally where, although there are studies on women in the Palaiologos period, they deal mainly with female figures from the imperial family or are confined to highly restricted topics (notarial documents, legislation, etc.). Therefore, we considered that research presenting an overview of the role of Byzantine women in the 13th-15th centuries is a novelty in Byzantine studies.

The second reason was its topicality within contemporary discussions of the role of women in the Orthodox Church. In the 13th-15th centuries, we already have crystallized canonical laws concerning the role of women in the Church; there are also commonalities with women today in terms of monastic life, family status, and ambivalent social attitudes. I felt it was important to know this historical context when discussing the role of women in the life of the Church today.

Research objectives

Research question from which the scientific approach started was: "Did women play a role in the cultural transformations and religious upheavals that marked the last two

centuries of the Byzantine Empire?". Based on this question, I have developed the objectives I have pursued in this thesis. They are:

1. General objective: identifying the cultural role of women in the period 1261-1453.

2. Secondary objectives:

a. Examine the involvement of women in important events in the life of the Church (i.e., hesychasm, unionist politics, the Arsenite schism, etc.) and in projects to found or restore churches;

b. Engagement in intellectual life, where the degree of literacy of women was taken into account, identification of how they participated in the intellectual life of Byzantium in the period under analysis;

c. Assessment of the political role of women in the Empire, which has not been given particular emphasis since it has been researched thoroughly in the literature;

d. Description and examination of female monastic life, the important aspects touched upon being those concerning intellectual training and the nuns' rights;

e. A comparative study of the intellectual, political, and ecclesiastical situation of women in the Palaiologos period with that of earlier times.

Methodology

The first important aspect is to clearly define the terms used in the research. The most important one is 'culture'. In my research, I have considered only two dimensions of it: subjective culture, which incorporates beliefs, values, and patterns of social and personal interaction; objective culture, of an external nature, which includes the man-made environment (legislation, political and religious institutions, art objects, clothing and so on). Other terms have also been defined, such as 'Byzantine', 'Byzantine revival', 'literary circle', 'patronage', etc.

A second aspect covers the concrete methods of investigation. In the present research, we have used both direct examination of historical sources and indirect methods such as philological, genealogical, and comparative. The philological method was used to analyze the evolution of certain terms and the intellectual abilities of women. The genealogical method

helped to understand how family members supported each other socially and economically. The comparative method was used where direct sources were insufficient or lacking.

Summary of main chapters and conclusions

The paper comprises seven chapters, each containing different sections, which have been developed using the deductive method. The research began with an overview of the status of Byzantine women up to the 13th century, followed by an analysis of the political and religious situation in the Palaiologos era. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive context to facilitate an understanding of the social and cultural role of women during the late Byzantine dynasty. In the following lines, the structure of the thesis will be detailed, highlighting all these aspects.

Chapter I. Byzantine women in the 4th-8th centuries. An overview, introduces the condition of Byzantine women before the research period, examining their social, political, and cultural roles. The aim is to identify similarities and differences in the cultural role of women in the Palaiologos period compared to previous centuries. The chapter covers topics such as women's social status and activities, dress, access to political power, cultural patronage, intellectual women and education, the family, and the role of the mother. It also explores the laws of betrothal, marriage, and divorce. Another important focus is the research into ancient views of women in philosophy and medicine, which influenced the views of the Church Fathers and writers.

Chapter II. Cultural, Political, and Religious Situation of the Byzantine Empire under the Palaiologos dynasty. This section covers the changes that took place after the Comnenian dynasty, the defining features of the Byzantine Middle Ages, and the reigns of the Palaiologos emperors. It also includes information on religious issues such as hesychasm, the Arsenite schism, and efforts to unify Rome. In addition, the chapter examines the cultural products, social changes, and important humanists that emerged during the Byzantine revival.

Chapter III. Status of women. An overview. This chapter has a similar structure to the first, covering various topics such as access to education, childbirth, marriage and divorce, the Byzantine perspective on women, licit and illicit activities, women doctors, abortion, and magical practices attributed to women. Due to the lack of information from the Palaiologos period, I have had to rely on sources from earlier historical periods when dealing

with women's involvement in medicine. In addition, I have analyzed the concept of "infirmetas sexus" in Roman and Byzantine civil law. Although some of these topics could have been dealt with briefly in the first chapter, I have opted to analyze them in full in this section as treating them in two separate chapters could lead to a poor or hard-to-follow understanding.

Chapter IV. Types Of Female Cultural Patronage. As already mentioned, in Chapter I an examination of cultural patronage and its different meanings was carried out. In this section, the focus is on women's contribution to culture in the Comnenian and Palaiologos periods, with some brief references to the social and political involvement of empresses. The subjects covered include women's cultural patronage of the imperial court, especially their participation in literary circles. The discussion centers around the literary circles of the Comnenian period as they served as a model for those of the Palaiologan era.

Chapter V. Women's role in religious controversies. I have considered the following points: identification of women who either opposed or supported imperial religious policy, such as the Byzantine Church's plans to unite with the Roman Church and the Arsenite schism; participation in the schismatic dispute, where I have chosen to identify and analyze the names of those who opposed the vision of St Gregory Palamas and the reasons behind their position. I found that Princess Irene-Eulogia Comnena was the only one about whom there is more information concerning the struggle against the hesychasm. That is why I have devoted a sub-chapter to the life and evolution of her religious ideas.

Chapter VI. The aristocracy and cultural patronage. Ordinary byzantines' contributions. This chapter focused on the analysis of women's involvement in patronage, restoration, and literary projects. Women from the aristocracy, as well as those from the lower strata of society (about whom we have little information), were considered. Their involvement in the foundation of churches and monasteries was looked at in the wider context of the changes that followed the Fourth Crusade and the battles with the Turks. We also looked at how women were represented in the epigrams that accompanied various donations and the reasons why they were given... Theodora Raoulaina provided a model for exemplifying the ways in which Byzantine women could financially support various literary projects.

Chapter VII. The feminine monasticism during the Palaiologos time. This chapter completes the analysis of Byzantine women. Given the fact that throughout the history of the

Byzantine Empire, monasteries played an essential cultural and religious role, in this chapter I have sought to investigate whether female monasteries contributed in any way to the cultural life of the Palaiologan period and what lifestyle they adopted. Therefore, I followed the following points: the situation of female monastic life after the Fourth Crusade; the intellectual level of nuns and the rights they enjoyed; the academic life of female monasteries compared to those of monks; the analysis of the lifestyle through the prism of four typologies made (or created for them) by three foundresses: Empress Theodora Palaiologina, Princess Irene-Eulogia, and Theodora Synadena.

Conclusions. They will aim to show to what extent the research question has been answered and whether the related objectives have been met. It is worth noting the objectives that they intertwine and create a complex narrative; therefore, it is difficult to separate them. The same is true for the two types of culture considered. The first objective is the cultural role of women. From the point of view of subjective culture, we observed that the Byzantines, in the period under analysis, had ambivalent attitudes toward women. However, there was a growing acceptance of gender equality and respect for women as transmitters of offspring and financial means. In terms of objective culture, under this first objective, we identified and analyzed the involvement or mention of women in religious conflicts, donations, and endowments, legislative and canonical provisions.

The second objective of the research was to identify how women participated in intellectual life. From the analysis, it can be concluded that the preponderance of women were illiterate, regardless of their social status. The only women who received any intellectual training were those of the Imperial Court. Women could participate in the academic life of Byzantium by getting involved in literary circles or financially supporting literati.

The third objective concerned the political role of women. Since premature deaths among the Palaiologan emperors were rare, opportunities for women in the imperial family to participate in politics were limited. Members of the ruling family were usually used as tools in imperial politics through strategic marriage alliances with Byzantium's neighbors.

As for the fourth objective, female monasticism, we observed that monasteries of monks were much richer, intellectually and financially. Nuns had minimal or no academic training, but enjoyed far more rights than ordinary women.

Comparing the situation of women in the Palaiologan period with that of earlier periods (objective five), we see that in the 4th-12th centuries, women were much more involved in the Church through positions such as deaconess or the institution of widows. Concerning political power, before the 13th century, women had more opportunities to be involved, both as regents and as independent sovereigns (the Irene case). Although their contribution cannot be compared to that of humanists such as Bessarion or Chumnos, women did intervene in social issues, despite poor intellectual training.

Thus, returning to the research question, the answer is affirmative: women played a positive role in Byzantine society in the 13th-15th centuries, even if their intellectual preparation was poor compared to that of humanists and men in general. Women became involved in the revival of nunneries, politics, and theological discussions, and they also offered financial support to the Byzantine Renaissance.

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